

You know I used to be a cosmopolite, but now I feel a sort of inner regeneration; everything Russian seems suddenly closer to me and I would be somehow upset if people took no account of Russia; I believe I am really beginning to love her.

I keep observing typical peasant women and muzhiks -- this insight may come in handy some day. How much freshness, uncorrupted, there is in the Russian landscape, oh, how much!

History is my nightly bed-companion and I relish it and delight in it, despite weariness and a gloomy morning at the office. It is the people I want to depict; I see them in my sleep, I think of them while I eat, they haunt me when I'm drinking, the people with their simple, unsophisticated ways. And what a richness there is in the people's speech. What an inexhaustable mine you have there, as soon as you seize hold of all that is real in the life of the Russian people.

Modest Musorgsky

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THE RUSSIA OF MODEST MUSORGSKY

BY Diane Shaver Clemens

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source*

*place on
first page.*

The Russia of Modest Musorgsky

It is through Modest Musorgsky more than any other musician that one can see nineteenth century Russian life. Musorgsky was a realist¹ in music, casting aside traditions and habits, and replacing them in music with the purely natural state of the visible world. One discovers his contemporary Russia by analyzing (1) the new musical medium through which he brought the visible world to life, and (2) the selection of subjects, characters, and texts (most of which he wrote or rewrote himself).

I. Creating Music to Reflect Life

Musorgsky sought "truth in music." In so doing, he brought to music the current artistic trends of rejecting art for art's sake and accepting the role of art as serving the people. Nothing should be depicted as it should be or was hoped to be, but only as it really was. Thus the intelligensia, searching for truthfulness in art, turned to the people whom they were to serve. It was then that the muzhik -- his sad fate, his needs, his strivings -- came fully into his own.

¹Most experts agree in classifying Musorgsky as a realist (although some point out in addition his many romantic features). These experts include those cited in the bibliography, as well as Donald Ferguson, A History of Musical Thought, and Alfred Einstein, Music in the Romantic Era. Jacques Barzun, however, in his Romanticism and the Modern Ego suggests that Musorgsky might better fit into the naturalist category. For the purposes of this paper, realist better describes Musorgsky, because he was a rebel against Romanticism and not Realism. He attempted only to recreate for the listener the same emotional process which the scene provoked in him. For this the visible world provided the construction, and Musorgsky considered his role that of interesting the listener in it by faithfully reproducing it, never by interpreting it or imposing upon it his individuality as a creator.

To achieve life as it really was, Musorgsky sought to make music fit reality. First of all, he sought to disengage the constituent elements of life, create the artistic equivalent as simply and appropriately as possible, and leave only the essential. The basis for achieving this reality was the word or words of speech, the means by which the people talk. Thus the rhythm of the peasant's everyday speech becomes the rhythm of music. Since speech is irregular, so must the music be irregular. As a result, there are up to twenty-seven changes of time in only fifty-three bars of music.

In addition to this, Musorgsky set for himself other rules to depict the people in music. The expressive value of the music is made to conform to the natural word order of conversation. The music is exuberant or dry if the words are so. If the conversation is banal, the music is purposely not above the ordinary. If the text presents contrasts, the music accentuates and underlines each phrase.

Thus symmetry, rhythm, the flowing phrase, and sound are put together not to characterize the composer's emotional response, but to recreate the natural state of sensation. Melodic lines do not adorn the words. Rather the characteristic inflections are sought out -- the expressive accent, the degree of stress, the breaks in rhythm, and ^{the} continuity, or lack of it, in the language. Music is but the auxiliary of the words.

Musorgsky's music mimicked. ^{what?} This is true especially of the instrumental music which does not have access to the words of the song or opera. His Intermezzo both labors with the Russian

peasant's footsteps through the snow, and yet sings and laughs with them on their way to the feast. In Pictures at an Exhibition the rhythm and movement of the paintings is reproduced, and one hears what the composer saw: children playing; birds chirping; a cart creaking by; the contrast between two Polish Jews, one fat and prosperous, the other thin, cringing, and begging.

For Musorgsky, the musical formulas and stylizations of other composers had to be rejected so that each situation could be portrayed for its differences. The subject had to be planned rather than to be allowed to flow forth, for it must be the cause rather than the result of emotion. His music was durchkomponiert, (or) *that is,* developed from beginning to end with each strophe treated in a special way. He never wrote two notes from habit.

Musorgsky's rules were never to let emotional faculties intervene between the visible world and its observer, and always to occupy himself with the precise and concrete, observing it and never deviating by applying imagination. The result is (in) intense, concentrated glimpses of life unequalled in music.

In summary, Musorgsky's music reflects life by underlining the words it uses. The speech and words are copied by Musorgsky from his observations of life or else they are rewritten from an observation which Musorgsky found worthy.

II. Russian Life through Musorgsky

The Russia of Musorgsky's words and music was composed largely of peasants.² If any one unifying theme can be found in his works,

²Modest had played with neighboring peasant children for the first ten years of his life. Like Puskin, he had heard many fairytales from his nyanya. His happiest recollections were of roaming the countryside, and when he would return to his family estate for visits, he sometimes preferred to live with the peasants

it is the inherent worthiness of these people. Folk themes are basic to the musical development, and the songs he wrote were called "people's songs." Musorgsky called his operas "people's musical drama."

Especially in the opera Boris Godunov, one sees this. *This is it to see, especially in*

Musorgsky makes the hero not Boris, but the people. Here the people include not just the masses appearing in the opera, but all the people as one people -- a Russian people. The characters are a cross section of Russian life, including a venerable monk who writes the history of Russia, the drunken mendicant friar, the naive and sweet children of Boris, the motherly nurse, the coarse barmaid, noblemen of varying ambitions capable of using those around them, and the idiot foretelling the future of Russia.

The question is not whether the people are good or bad. They are human, and as such are worthy of being portrayed with faults and virtues. Musorgsky loved them for being the heart of Russia and embodying purely Russian characteristics. When the people move about in groups or masses, they become important in shaping future events. Thus it is the people who plead with Boris in the opening Coronation scene to accept the crown for their sake. Then the same people forsake Boris mercilessly and turn to the false Dimitri, pretender to the throne.³ Here the Russian people, seen as one piece, are massive, ignorant, stupid, submissive, and capable of wild, frantic revolt.

Characterizations of individual peasants are also rich in in their huts rather than in the manor house. It is also significant that Musorgsky was the only leading Russian musician who never travelled to the West or left his native Russia even for a trip.

³This is a particularly Russian type, which has arisen several times in history at a moment of crisis, claiming to be a dead Tsar or Tsarovich.

Musorgsky's other works. There is the wife in To the Mushrooms, who, while picking mushrooms, meditates on poisoning her husband. There is the barefoot philosopher in Kalistrat, in which this hero, ragged, cheerful, sly, and drunk, cracks jokes about his poor wife who is meanwhile killing herself laundering the rags of their many offspring. In the Ragamuffin, a street urchin pursues an old woman and subjects her to a string of mocking epithets until she turns to thrash him. His galloping around the old woman accompanied by exuberant gestures furnishes Musorgsky with an exact and continuous rhythm pattern.

In contrast to the peasant, Musorgsky finds other classes and groups less admirable, especially the boyars and noblemen. In Boris, the fine-clothed, treacherous nobles such as Shuisky possess ambitions greater than their loyalty. In Khovanshchina, Prince Khovansky and his son Andrew exemplify the Russian noblemen -- jovial, brutal, and ambitious, stopping at nothing. The leader of the pure strain of Russian life, the Old Believers, spurns the boyars: "You boyars are only fit for talking. They are the people, who work."

The Tsar himself does not fare much better. Boris, as in Pushkin's play from which Musorgsky took his story, is cast as the murderer of the young Tsarovich.⁴ Yet Musorgsky's Boris, unlike Pushkin's, is partially redeemed by his remorse and suffering for this crime. For his human frailty, the listener grows to sympathize with this tormented human, and is tortured by Boris' misery and death. It is agonizing to experience the frantic

⁴Leading historians do not accept this interpretation.

hallucinations synchronized with the tick-tock of the "mechanical clock" scene. And Boris' realistic death is the first in opera in which the victim does not sing lyrically forth in a great spurt of health before keeling over. Alternating between terror and calmness, Boris becomes progressively weaker while rasping and changing key (continually moving down the scale) until the last gasp, which is not even a sung note.

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Musorgsky was striving to create the "soul of Russia." In addition to using some of the above mentioned types, he accomplished this also by selecting from Russian history major themes of great moments of turmoil and violent tragedy. Hence Boris is the story of the Time of Troubles, and Khovanshchina is the uprising by the streltsy and Old Believers against Peter the Great. In the latter case, the theme is more significant because the basic problem is essentially the struggle between the Slavophiles, represented by the Old Believers, and the Westernizers, represented by Peter.

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The mystical as an aspect of the Russian soul recurs in Musorgsky's music. The holy idiot in Boris cries out his prophecies to the scorn and mockery of the populace, who are unaware of the impending doom. The monk Pimen relates his vision of the dead child, which sends Boris into his final hallucination. Martha, the fervent mystic in Khovanshchina, predicts Khovansky's fate.

Russian Orthodoxy, basic to Russia of the nineteenth century, is also basic to the operas. Many old epic and religious themes faithfully represent the rough and mystic atmosphere of the Old Believers in Khovanshchina, and somber, simple motifs from the notes of the common chord reveal a purity and beauty of this true Russian

movement. In Boris religion intermingled with ambition provides motivation for Gregori to seek the throne. In both operas, background choruses of monks contrast with the secular motifs of such individual feelings as greed, ambition, joy, hope, and fear.

Musorgsky's love for everything Russian can also be seen in his satirical treatment of deviations from the Russian type. The Classicist is, for example, a reactionary old pedagogue who intones his (the opposite of Musorgsky's) artistic credo: "I make war on all innovators." The song is a mockery of the classical ^{form} by ridiculously using four parts embellished with foolish melodic grace. Another, deserving no better than humorous treatment for thinking himself superior to Russian life, is Conceit. He pompously struts and swaggers along, refusing to see his family or go to church because the floors might not be clean.

In the Russia of Musorgsky, life was tragic and fate was cruel.⁵ In the Peasant's Cradle Song, a mother realizes poverty as the peasant's lot, and watches her baby die. The Orphan Beggar Child, in a monotonous moan, without accent or breath, pleads for warmth and food. In The Goat a young girl who was once terrified of an old goat must adjust to marrying one. O My Savishna is the pathetic monologue of the village idiot who professes his love of a young girl. Songs and Dances of Death brings death to many: the dying peasant with his tender song contrasted to the Trepak; the peasant plodding wearily through the snow; a sick child whose mother anxiously watches as Death replaces her at its bedside; a young maiden who is embraced and then stifled by her suitor, death; and corpses on the battlefield, where death rides gallantly, jeering.

⁵Exceptions to this are such fantasies as A Night on Bald Mountain or music from the world of children, such as In the Nursery. These reflect the Musorgsky who loved the fairytale and the children, and saw in both the naivete and remoteness that separate man from his tragic reality.

Bibliography

I. Primary sources

Jay Leyda and Sergei Bertensson, The Musorgsky Reader, New York, Norton & Company, 1947. This is a collection of manuscripts relating to Musorgsky, especially his many letters to intimate friends. It is invaluable for one who seeks to understand what Musorgsky tried to do in music.

Recordings of many of Musorgsky's works and their texts. These were purchased by me in the Soviet Union. They include some original versions of works later altered by Musorgsky and his friends for stage presentation. His works are the most important source for analyzing his view of Russia. I did not have access to his unpublished works.

II. Secondary sources

M. D. Calvocoressi (translated by A. E. Huss), Musorgsky, The Russian Musical Nationalist, London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1919. This book, in which the English often appears quite rough, nicely handles general aspects of Musorgsky's life and musical innovations.

Mikhail Zetlin (translated and edited by George Panin), The Five, New York, International Universities Press, Inc., 1959. Covering most of the leading Russian musicians of the latter half of the nineteenth century, this book provides valuable insights into the inter-relationships of the musical factions and their ideas.

A nice little analysis —
Publishing would probably depend
on whether the theme & your interpretation
analysis may be considered "original" or "new"
to the informed.